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Boswell, MJ

Title	Holocaust impiety in Tim Blake Nelson's The Grey Zone
Authors	Boswell, MJ
Type	Conference or Workshop Item
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/23155/
Published Date	2009

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Holocaust Impiety in Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone*

Tim Blake Nelson's 2001 film *The Grey Zone* is set in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp and tells the story of the largely Jewish Sonderkommandos, or 'death squads', that were responsible for running the camp's crematoria. Taking its title from an essay of the same name by Primo Levi in his final book, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), the film charts the days leading up to a chaotic rising in October 1944 led by the twelfth Sonderkommando: a revolt that resulted in the destruction of half the camp's ovens but which was ultimately put down by the SS in ruthless fashion. Portraying the day to day running of death factories against a backdrop of corpses and a rumbling industrial soundtrack, the film opened to mixed reviews and performed poorly at the US box office. Despite a stellar Hollywood cast that included Harvey Keitel, Steve Buscemi, David Arquette and Mira Sorvino, it played for just nine weeks and grossed only around a tenth of the \$5million it cost to make.¹ Considering the notable critical and financial successes of other Holocaust films during the period such as *Schindler's List* (1993), *Life is Beautiful* (1997) and *The Pianist* (2002), *The Grey Zone* seemed to mark the limits of just how much atrocity the movie-going public was prepared to pay for.

The film's title is not referenced until the closing sequence when the remains of the dead are described as grey 'bits of dust' that settle on the Sonderkommando members in the crematoria. Those unfamiliar with Levi's essay might equally interpret the title as a poetic rendering of place, describing the drabness of the camp buildings and the monotony of camp life. For Levi, however, this putatively geographic term describes a moral and human condition as much as a physical location: specifically, it relates to the moral ambiguousness of survival in the camps, which often involved complicity with the SS and the killing process.

Levi's own survival was in a large part due to the fact that in the winter of 1944 he was able to find work as a laboratory assistant in the Buna synthetic rubber plant because of his professional background as a chemist. He thus came to occupy a crucial, if lowly, position in what he described as the 'ascent of the privileged', which ranged from the 'sweepers, kettle washers, night-watchmen, bed-smoothers [...] checkers of lice and scabies, messengers and interpreters' to the Kapos, barracks chiefs, clerks and other 'grey, ambiguous persons, ready to compromise' who took on positions of command.²

For Levi, the fate of the Sonderkommandos illustrates how self-preservation in the camps generally went hand in hand with moral and spiritual abasement. He uses the term 'the grey zone' to describe the challenge that these men thus present to what he terms the 'Manichean tendency' to view the history of the camps simply in terms of good and evil, black and white.³

In borrowing this title, Nelson demonstrated his willingness to follow Levi's lead in pulling apart such historical and ethical binaries. Nelson's taut script dramatises the impossible choices faced by the Sonderkommando members in an environment in which, as Levi writes, 'the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero'.⁴ As one Sonderkommando member, Hoffman, puts it in *The Grey Zone*, 'You can kill yourself. That's the only choice.' Reflecting on the ethics of survival in a world where the normal rules of ethical conduct simply did not apply, Nelson's film can be considered a kind of morality play for an era of atrocity.

The film's opening credits state that it is 'based in part on the eyewitness account of Dr. Miklos Nyiszli, the Hungarian Jew assigned by Dr. Josef Mengele to assist in medical experiments on camp inmates'. Nelson drew key narrative strands from the book *Auschwitz* (1962), Nyiszli's account of his time in the camp, which the director made mandatory reading

for the film's cast along with *The Drowned and the Saved*, Filip Muller's *Eyewitness Auschwitz* (1979) and other Sonderkommando testimonies.

In order to represent the ‘human story’ of those whom Levi dubbed the ‘crematorium ravens’, Nelson drew together two key historical events from these eyewitness testimonies: the twelfth Sonderkommando’s pyrrhic uprising and their discovery of a young Hungarian girl who had survived the gas by being buried under the bodies near a small pocket of air.⁵ As Nelson concedes, a straightforward chronological portrayal of the twelfth Sonderkommando would probably ‘have no audience’ and these two events did not, in reality, coincide quite so neatly.⁶ According to Nyiszli’s testimony, the discovery of the girl took place some time before the rising and she was never hidden by the Sonderkommando, as the film suggests; rather, she was immediately discovered by the SS Officer Muhsfeldt who gave the order for her to be shot in the back of the neck. By allowing the discovery of the girl to take place immediately before the rising, Nelson knowingly conflates ‘two actual but separate events into one another for dramatic tension’: notably, some of the prisoners feel that her survival jeopardises their plans, while for others it lends meaning to their fight.⁷

While not always faithful to exact chronologies or narrative details, *The Grey Zone* allows the actual killing process to tell its own story, rendering the work of the death squads in graphic detail. Sustained accounts of the exterminations are a feature of the testimonies that Nelson draws on in his script. These testimonial renditions of the most gruesome aspects of the killing process influenced what Nelson termed the film’s ‘aesthetic strategy’ which was, in his words, ‘to show everything’.⁸ In this, and even in the use of a term such as ‘aesthetic strategy’, Nelson self-consciously positions himself against the work of fiercely ‘pious’ directors such as Claude Lanzmann, whom Nelson admires, but regards as an example of the kind of filmmaker who had, in his words, ‘used their success as a platform for determining the types of films others should make’.⁹ Accusing Lanzmann of placing the

Holocaust ‘off limits’ for those wishing ‘to examine the human condition through fictional or quasi-fictional narrative’, Nelson wrote:

To extend sanctimoniously the place [the Holocaust] occupies to an area so far beyond that of other tragedies that it becomes untouchable for certain forms of artistic expression is not only self-righteous, but also self-defeating [...] If we are never to repeat certain chapters in history, they must be explored thoroughly, without limit to particular media. To my mind there can be no exceptions. No event is sacred.¹⁰

Unremittingly bleak in its outlook and graphic in its depiction of the physical extermination of the victims, as Nelson put it, ‘the movie is grim, and it should be, given its topic.’¹¹ And it is not only the visual content of the film that is grim; *The Grey Zone* eschews the redemptory narratives that characterise Hollywood films in general and Hollywood films about the Holocaust in particular, with the result that it lacks the eventual spiritual uplift of films such as *Schindler’s List*, *Life is Beautiful* and *The Pianist*. *Schindler’s List*, in particular, is a cinematic reference point that *The Grey Zone* defines itself against. Both films single out young girls from among the crowd of victims to individualise the wider fate of the murdered Jews: the girl with the red coat in *Schindler’s List* and the girl who survives the gas in *The Grey Zone*. Both feature footage from inside what we take to be gas chambers; only in *The Grey Zone* gas comes out of the shower heads, not water. The graphic horrors and anti-redemptory schemas of *The Grey Zone* directly challenge the pious morality of Spielberg’s tagline, ‘whoever saves one life, saves the world entire’; indeed, in *The Grey Zone* the decision to save the life of the girl who survived the gas is seen by some Sonderkommando members as precisely *failing* to serve a wider good by jeopardising the revolt that is planned

for that evening. The plotter Abramowics warns: ‘Don’t fuck this up for one life. You’ll be shot on the spot, and so will she, then there’s an alert, and tonight’s impossible.’

Nelson’s film deals in pragmatics rather than metaphysics; even when they do eventually agree to save the girl the positive meaning that Hoffman and other Sonderkommando members attribute to this action is revealed to be illusory.

[Play *The Grey Zone* from 1.29.58]

Noting the resemblance between Anne Frank and the young, gaunt, black-haired actress playing this girl whose face featured prominently on trailers and posters for the film, in ‘*The Grey Zone: the Cinema of Choiceless Choices*’ Lawrence Baron argues that Nelson’s reading of Levi had convinced him that people are not basically ‘good at heart’ as Anne Frank had hoped, and that consequently ‘casting an actress who looks like Anne Frank may have been motivated by Nelson’s intent to challenge the optimism of Anne before she endured incarceration at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.’¹² While Nelson has explained that it was important for him to portray the Jews ‘dealing with their situation in a strong way’, their circumstances are clearly insurmountable and the final rising is not a display of strength; rather it is shambolic and ends in mass death.¹³

In the extensive Director’s Notes that he distributed to the cast and crew a few months before filming, Nelson wrote: ‘While there are those in the story that act heroically at given points, this is not a film about heroes’.¹⁴ Instead it reflects the normal experience of imprisonment in Auschwitz-Birkenau, which for most meant death, and a further pointed contrast to *Schindler’s List* comes in the way that *The Grey Zone* steers clear of representing any kind of heroic struggle that leads to survival: rather, it follows Levi in showing that such struggles were usually in vain, and even when they weren’t they were often far from heroic.

The closest the film comes to offering a standard Hollywood hero is the Sonderkommando member Hoffman, who is played by David Arquette. But while Hoffman is responsible for instigating one of the most significant and humane acts of the film when he notices that the young girl has survived the gas and tries to save her life by concealing her in the crematorium complex, he is also responsible for one of the most savage murders when he beats an elderly, well-dressed Jewish man to death in front of his wife because the man refuses to hand him his gold watch. This action is made all the more shocking for the decision to cast Arquette, an actor more normally associated with goofy comedies and the *Scream* teen slasher films, in the role of Hoffman. Indeed, *The Grey Zone* draws on our preconceptions about Arquette in order to complicate our response to, and condemnation of, Hoffman: there remains a sense of a human character – someone we might, in other circumstances, be able to connect or identify with – even as he commits a barbaric act that is made to seem out of character as a result of the casting alone.

The casting of familiar faces rather than unknown actors not only generates a certain sympathy for these out of place prisoners; it also closes the gap between then and now, us and them. Closely identified with the experience of modernity, the cast of ‘everyman’ actors such as Buscemi and Arquette offsets the victims’ ‘otherness’ and emphasises Nelson’s portrayal of victims who were Jews but, in his words,

above all *human*, never distinguishing themselves as either better or worse than the rest of their race – the human race. An exploration of this very thesis, and why a vast majority of us will always choose life, even if it means taking life, is what the film *The Grey Zone* is all about. Its context is the holocaust, but it’s a film about being human.¹⁵

In its concern to map the Holocaust experience onto the lives of all those come after, *The Grey Zone* can be considered an archetypal work of what I term Holocaust impiety, embodying all the principals that underpin Gillian Rose's critique of Holocaust piety. She wrote:

To argue for silence, prayer, the banishment equally of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of 'ineffability', that is, non-representability, is *to mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human [Rose's emphasis].¹⁶

An important instance of Holocaust impiety, the film also helps trace the origins of this irreverent mode of representation back to the victims themselves, and in particular to Nelson's 'guide', Primo Levi, who viewed the camps as 'an excellent "laboratory"' that could help us understand wider truths about the relationship between power and privilege: human truths whose significance stretched beyond the camps.¹⁷ The essay famously ends with Levi's description of the way that 'we are all in the ghetto' and 'close by the train is waiting'.¹⁸

In order to matter to the modern audience, Nelson felt that *The Grey Zone* had to avoid becoming a period film from which the audience might feel distanced. He noted that 'this movie, while accurate to period in every way, must feel for the audience as though it's happening now.'¹⁹ Despite its title, *The Grey Zone* is therefore shot in colour. In addition, first person point of view shots are frequently used, especially for the events from which an audience member might *most* want to distance themselves, such as the death of the girl who survived the gas. One scene is even shot from inside the gas chamber using a low hand held camera, again representing the point of view of a child. As the naked prisoners are ushered

into the ‘shower room’ the camera is jostled back and forth and spoken to by an anxious woman as the bodies gradually squeeze tighter together.

Targeting an English-speaking, Hollywood-savvy US audience who would be asked to take a look not just at history but also themselves, Nelson was also keen to avoid ‘the middle European accents that pervade most holocaust films’ as these, in his words, too often ‘distance more than they engage’.²⁰ The only characters who speak with a pronounced foreign accent are Harvey Keitel and other actors playing members of the German SS. This lack of dialogic authenticity was picked up by several negative reviews of the film in the American press: the New York Times called it ‘a stagy variation of Quentin Tarantino-esque argot’.²¹ In echoing the plotting and scheming of more traditional war films and making a sharp distinction between American accents for the Sonderkommando and German accents for the SS, it could be argued that Nelson creates stark polarities that risk pulling apart his own ‘grey zone’; or at least the layers of moral complication that underpin Levi’s thinking are not applied to anyone of German origins. However, in this Nelson is again very true to Levi who, while remaining keen ‘to explore the space which separates [...] the victims from the persecutors’, had little time for those who confused the two, or who viewed the victim-executioner relationship as a natural bond existing in a world where we are all victims or murderers who accept our roles in life as such.²² He wrote:

I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer.²³

Keitel’s performance and the contrasting accents thus ensure that there is no confusion between victims and executioners and the dialogic inconsistency is even cleverly referenced

in the latter half of the film when Keitel barks ‘don’t speak Hungarian’ at the squad members, effectively rendering the linguistic differences – and, with them, the possibilities for subterfuge – that existed in the camps. Regardless of the cinematic merits of the film – and it is no *Schindler’s List* - those who critique its inauthentic accents or historical inaccuracies fail to make the inward turn that it implores its audience to make. The modernisms of *The Grey Zone* are designed to elaborate the impious, humanist interpretative structure that the film adopts virtually wholesale from Levi, a survivor. In this regard, *The Grey Zone* can be considered an example of a post-testimonial work in which an engagement with survivor philosophy takes precedence over fidelity to survivor testimony. A kind of benign revisionism is its working mode.

¹ Lawrence Baron, ‘*The Grey Zone*: the Cinema of Choiceless Choices’ in Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth eds., *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2005), p. 292. As a comparison, *Schindler’s List* (1993) grossed \$96 million at the US box office and an additional \$225 million overseas. See <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=schindlerslist.htm>, accessed 15 August 2009.

² Ibid., p. 33.

³ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴ Levi, ‘The Grey Zone’, p. 33 and p. 29.

⁵ Levi, ‘The Grey Zone’, p. 43.

⁶ Tim Blake Nelson, *The Grey Zone: Director’s Notes and Screenplay* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2003), pp. 158-59.

⁷ Ibid., p. 158.

⁸ www.moviemaker.com accessed 2 August 2009.

⁹ Nelson, *Grey Zone*, p. xiv.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. xiv.

¹¹ Ibid., p. xiii.

¹² Baron, ‘*The Grey Zone*’, p. 289.

¹³ www.moviemaker.com accessed 2 August 2009.

¹⁴ Nelson, *Grey Zone*, p. 140.

¹⁵ Nelson, *Grey Zone*, p. xiii.

¹⁶ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 43.

¹⁷ Nelson, *The Grey Zone*, p. xv; Levi, ‘The Grey Zone’, p. 27.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 141.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 158.

²¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/18/movies/18GREY.html> accessed 15 August 2009.

²² Levi, ‘The Grey Zone’, p. 25 and p. 32.

²³ Ibid., pp. 32-3.